Dave
LUAK
RACHAEL

GOING FOR THE BYRNE

written by ***Ken Scrudato*** *photographed by* ***Michael Halsband***

It's been 18 years since David Byrne, at the time Talking Heads' arch head, first sung the phrase, "As we get older, and stop making sense..." Certainly enough time has passed to have put those words to the test. In case you hadn't been paying attention all this while, Mr. Byrne has fortunately managed to retain his, facilities, if you will. In fact, he's virtually become the closest thing to a renaissance man that his generation can reasonably claim; deftly and unpredictably channeling both his pop and avant-garde propensities into his work in music, art, video, film, and even business, via his marvelously quirky record label Luaka Bop.

His new record began its creative journey when Byrne holed up in a small town in Spain to write. His desire was to make music that was as visceral as it was groovy, and *Look Into the Eyeball*, in the end, is jittery, introspective, droll, cinematic, and naturally, a slave to the rhythm. Byrne, not content to simply repeat himself, notably pulls off his first Spanish vocal performance ("Desconocido Soy"), and with "U.B. Jesus," even attempts a gospel song.

We sat for a chat and sipped tea in a quite serene patch of greenery behind the Luaka Bop offices, and though we were maybe only twenty or so blocks from CBGB's, it was almost hard to imagine that this was one of the guys who, in his own rather peculiar fashion, made punk happen 25 years ago.

Ken Scrudato: You must be proud of the fact that you've managed to survive all these years and maintain your artistic freedom?

David Byrne: I've got to believe that a lot of it is luck, that I've been in the right place at the right time. Occasionally I would have a record that actually connected with an audience that was large enough to bring in some money. Now, of course, working with artists on (my) label, I think how are they going to survive creatively as long as I have?

Speaking of large audiences, you've mentioned early influences like Godard and Fellini. Godard was arguably obsessed with the tragedy of the lives of the everyday person, and Fellini had a sometimes-sentimental view of everyday people. You, yourself, really did appear to have this fascination with people's everyday lives, but ostensibly from a satirical point of view. How much was satirical, and how much was genuine infatuation?

It might have been more satirical at some point, but then it grew into more of an affection. There was a screening recently of *True Stories*, this film I did in Texas about 15 years ago. At the time I did the film it was received as being kind of ironic and satirical. But as

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I watched, it seemed apparent to me that it was really pretty sweet and affectionate to the people. I always felt that the average person is maybe equally as heroic as the guy who gets his statue in the park.

Very early on there seemed to be this David Byrne persona, whether created on purpose or by accident, that involved itself in everything you did. But over the last 12 or 13 years, it seems like another David Byrne has emerged, as if you were peeking out from behind that persona. Some artists, of course, use personas as a way of deflecting the media and the attention. Was that the case with you?

I remember being aware of that when I first moved to New York and first started performing. I also remember dropping it pretty early on, but I guess it kind of stuck. It seemed like a good enough fit, so I couldn't shake it off, even if I wanted to. And I did want to, because I felt like I was bored with it. I guess it's possible that it would resurface when I was performing, that I would unconsciously slip back into it.

You're still making records that seem to have a tremendous exuberance to them. How are you not jaded after all this time?

(Pause) Boy, that's a...whoa...I don't know. I guess there's enough going on that I hear other people doing that is inspiring both in a creative way and a competitive way. If everybody was doing crap, you could just kick back and toss out any piece of shit. But when you perceive the bar as being set up there, you've got to aim up there too.

Do you search around for that inspiration?

I search, but it's also just around me. It's what I've done all my life, so it's not hard to do.

Well, latching on to the Brazilian thing back in '88 was a pretty random move at the time.

(Laughs hard) Yeah, I guess so.

It's not like you were rolling along with some kind of zeitgeist. But it shot you in this whole different direction creatively.

It did. And a lot of people assumed I went south of the border and never came back. (Laughs)

It seems like *Look Into the Eyeball* is all the David Byrnes each trying to get a piece of the real estate. There are a lot of different things going on. Was there no specific idea behind it?

The only particular idea was (to have) a lot of drums and bass and percussion and a lot of strings. Within that, musically, it was just all over the map. At some point I thought, I wonder if this is going to hang together or not. I did take a few songs off that didn't sound like they belonged, musically.

You've talked about this record in terms of enacting a revolution with the mind and the senses. What do you mean by that?

Well, I started thinking that maybe people can change their way of thinking through being seduced by an idea or by another person; that they find or get a taste of some kind of alternative that is actually more pleasurable to them. And that makes them change their way of living, way of thinking, whatever. They're not being forced at the point of a gun; they're going there because it feels better. And it might be a small thing at first, but maybe that's the way it happens. Little by little people find something that feels a little better and it spreads out and happens by a kind of seduction or by a kind of sensuality, and gradually they change their way of thinking about something. And I thought that maybe I could try to do a little bit of that in a record. Make a record that on the surface is pleasant to listen to, but somewhere inside it actually plants some kind of seed. Maybe just a hint of an idea...

Well, that's how cultural revolutions begin, don't they?

Yeah, yeah.

At the time that you first emerged with the Talking Heads, irony was finding a really interesting place in pop music; but you've become somewhat more literal as time has gone on. What I want to ask is, do you think irony has been taken too far, and it's better to just say what you mean?

I don't think people can. I think it's a defensive reaction to the culture we live in. And people find the culture so complex and difficult and sometimes offensive and confusing, that they sometimes have to protect themselves against it. And that's one of the few ways to do it. I can say to myself that maybe this is a pretty irony-free record, but at that same time, I can see why things are out of hand, because that's the only way that people can survive.

You have to use irony as a method of keeping your guard up?

Yeah, because look what you have to live with. If you took it all literally...

You'd go mad.

Right, you'd go completely nuts.